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FM AMEMBASSY NAIROBI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 3174
INFO RUCNIAD/IGAD COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
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RHMFIASS/CJTF HOA PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NAIROBI 003173

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/20/2026

TAGS: PGOV MARR PTER KISL SO

SUBJECT: COURTS ADVANCING ON BAIDOA? POSSIBLY NOT

Classified By: D/PolCouns L. Peterson, Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Reports of an imminent Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) attack on Baidoa appear exaggerated. Two reports, although differing in details, link the militia movement to Rahanweyn clan disgruntlement with the Transitional Federal Government. The UN advises that the Court militia has returned to the town of Bur Acaba, approximately 80 kilometers south-east of Baidoa. The UN further advises that 30 to 40 Ethiopian vehicles have entered Baidoa with unspecified numbers of men and equipment. The UN estimates that the Courts do not have sufficient force numbers in the area to mount an attack on the government, nor does it appear that the Ethiopian presence is intended as an attack force. While it does not appear that an attack from either side is imminent, these events demonstrate how quickly events could spin out of control. They also demonstrate the willingness of some in the Courts to probe their military limits, a practice likely to spark a confrontation. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Press reports on July 19 indicated that militias affiliated with the UIC had advanced to within 35 kilometers of Baidoa, sparking fears that an attack on the seat of the Transitional Federal Institutions (TFIs) was imminent. Information from the European Commission, which on July 19 moved a Somali staff member from Baidoa to Bur Acaba, indicates that this movement was not instigated by the Courts, but by Rahanweyn clan leaders who have lost patience with the manner in which the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) is handling its affairs. Rahanweyn militias moved only a few kilometers out of Bur Acaba in the direction of Baidoa, making it appear that this was intended to send a signal to TFG officials, without necessarily indicating plans to push through to the transitional capital.

¶3. (C) There remain, however, elements of concern in this movement. First are the numbers that have coalesced around the Rahanweyn force: With 125 deserters from Baidoa, the militia now has 450 members and 60 technicals, making it highly mobile. In addition, two of the force commanders are new and were very recently trained in Mogadishu by the Courts. This raises questions about whether this movement will remain Rahanweyn-driven or will be taken over by Court ambitions. Nevertheless, the EC believes the Courts will work to defuse the tensions around Bur Acaba because their interest now is in maintaining the appearance of openness to dialogue.

¶4. (C) The UN advises that the July 19 advance involved a force led by Sheikh Muqtar Robow, which traveled as far as a place called Daynune (30 km SE of Baidoa) to meet and offer protection to 70 Rahanweyn defectors from the Baidoa militia, who were being pursued by President Yusuf's forces. The

number of defectors eventually grew to 150. After retrieving these fighters, the Court militia returned to Bur Acaba (approximately 80 km from Baidoa. The UN does not believe the Courts intend to attack Baidoa, in part because they would need a much larger force to undertake such an assault. The UN also advised that there are already Ethiopian troops in Baidoa, but not a large enough force to attempt an attack on the Courts' militias (30 to 40 vehicles have entered the town). The UN security chief expressed the opinion that the Ethiopian presence was intended only as a signal to the Courts that they should not advance further, not as a threat of imminent action. He considered an attack from either side highly unlikely at this time.

¶5. (C) In a July 19 conversation with the Acting DCM, Parliament Speaker Sharif Hassan Sheikh Aden indicated that reports of Court militia movements did not appear new, noting that the Courts had controlled Bur Acaba for some time. Sharif Hassan stated that the main aim of the Courts is to gain the support of the Somali people, so it would not necessarily be in their interest to advance militarily on Baidoa. He described the Courts as being on a diplomatic offensive. Because the Courts' delegation had waited extensively in Khartoum to resume the dialogue, it now appeared that the TFG was the obstacle to peace. He emphasized his belief in the importance of dialogue with the Courts. (NOTE: The Speaker was to depart July 22 for an NDI-sponsored study trip to the U.S. Because of events inside Somalia and Sharif Hassan's personal belief in the need for dialogue, he has requested that this program be delayed. END NOTE.)

¶6. (C) COMMENT: While it does not appear that an attack from

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either side is imminent, these events demonstrate how quickly events could spin out of control, even if only on the basis of misinformation. Although some individuals in the Courts continue to profess their commitment to the principles signed in Khartoum and a continuation of the dialogue process, others seem intent on probing the limits to see what may spark a reaction from the TFG or the Ethiopians. Such probing seems likely to lead to a direct confrontation at some point. Because of the Courts' ability to appeal to hearts and minds, and because of Somali antipathy toward Ethiopia, we believe the Courts could ultimately emerge the victors in a military stand-off. END COMMENT.

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